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V CORPS' 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION HELP IRAQI DATE FARMERS WITH VITAL CROP DUSTING OPERATIONS

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE WARHORSE, Iraq –Soldiers of Multi-National Force

Iraq recently began an operation to help pump a little gas into the local economy in Diyala Province.

In a cooperative effort between Iraq's Ministry of Agriculture and MNF-I, Iraqi pilots began crop-dusting the province's date palm fields last week. It is the first time Iraqi pilots have flown in their airspace since Operation Iraqi Freedom began more than a year ago.



Members of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division are helping Iraq's date industry with the crop dusting vital to its success. The Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture pilots fly Russian-made Mi-2 helicopters purchased from Poland in 1985, some of which are nearly 50 years old.

The joint operation is intended to cover

nine areas in Diyala province and will continue until the date spraying season ends, said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Phil Owen, aviation operations Officer for V Corps' 1st Infantry Division. Owen, who coordinated initial efforts with the Ministry of Agriculture, said the spraying will cover an estimated five to eight square kilometers per day.

He explained that spraying is critical to the operation of Iraq's date palm industry. About 60 percent of the world's dates come from Iraq, and of those, about 65 percent come from Diyala province. Because it is so important, the Ministry of Agriculture requested MNF-I support, Owen explained.

"This is really an Iraqi operation. It's their equipment, their pilots, their chemicals, their mechanics", said Owen. "The only thing we're providing them so far is some fuel and lubricants, and we're giving them a place to secure their aircraft at night. Other than that, it's their operation 100 percent."

The Ministry of Agriculture's head pilot, Capt. Muntadhar Mohamed, began meeting with MNF-I representatives over two months ago to help coordinate the operation. An agriculture pilot for the past 24 years who trained in the United States, he said the MNF-I supplied the operation with 10,000 liters of fuel. "The most important thing is the security," he said. "We did a good job of cooperating together."

Dr. Hussein Ali-Tahir, a pesticide analysis specialist with the Ministry of Agriculture, earned a PhD in chemistry from the University of Dublin. Ali-Tahir certified the chemicals, which he said are not dangerous for humans or animals. They have been spraying the crops for more than 50 years, he added. "Every year we apply (the pesticide) to use against these insects," he said referring to the white fly and fruit fly. "All the date palm last year was infected, so Army support is really good, because we needed that. It is very important to us. It is important for the people."

The only real concern is that the chemicals are poisonous to bees, said Owen.

Because a lot of local residents raise bees, a warning is issued the night before spraying so beekeepers can take protective measures.

1st Lt. Michael R. Adams, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry aviation liaison officer to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, took over the project May 14 and has been coordinating through military channels for airspace, flight routes, and logistical issues. "These pilots are heroes," he said. "They are risking their lives for the people of Iraq, knowing that insurgent forces might try to disrupt this operation."

The aircraft are Russian-made MI-2 helicopters, purchased from Poland in 1985. While initially sent to the military, the Ministry of Agriculture took them shortly after for use as crop dusters. Two aircraft have been pieced together from the parts of 17, said Owen. The pilots, he added, are not military pilots. "All of the pilots work for the Ministry of Agriculture. Some of these pilots have been flying 15-20 years," he said. "They're all just regular crop dusters, just like we have back in the States. That's their job."

Adams said the second aircraft will perform a test flight May 20 and anticipates that it will be ready and in use May 21. He explained that the aircraft was built in 1955 and is almost 50 years old. "This shows the determination of these guys to get them up and repair them," he said. "The result is that the crops won't be destroyed and that's extremely important to them. The spraying is stimulating the economy by providing farmers and merchants with jobs."

Following the completion of the date palm operation, the pilots will continue to spray other crops such as wheat, rice and corn, said Adams. Based on the success of the

operation, they will most likely move on to other provinces throughout the country and continue spraying throughout the year.

